

## ARE THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF “SILENCE AND SOLITUDE” REALLY BIBLICAL?



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Much recent Christian literature on spiritual disciplines advocates the practices of “silence and solitude” (e.g., *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, by Ruth Haley Barton, InterVarsity, 2004). Scriptural precedents for solitude and silence are given from both Old and New Testament texts (e.g., 1 Kgs 19; Mark 1:35). Such texts, however, usually come from narrative portions of Scripture, and little thought has gone into determining whether the patterns described are normative. Furthermore, other portions of Scripture that seem to speak in a praise-worthy way about a biblical figure’s *lack* of solitude and silence go ignored (e.g., Mark 6:32–34; 2 Cor 11:26–27).

Is the evangelical church’s increasing adoption of silence and solitude really a return to biblically-sanctioned practices? Or, is the evangelical church simply parroting the secular culture’s fascination with Eastern religious meditation and more “holistic” approaches to life management? In answering these questions, this article seeks to provide a balanced, biblical understanding of the spiritual disciplines of “silence and solitude.”<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Within the last twenty years, evangelicals have shown a growing interest in spiritual formation.<sup>2</sup> We have recognized that one can have a stadium-full of people who affirm certain theological propositions, but who demonstrate little fruit of the Spirit. The paraphrased words of James 2:19

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., see Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999); Richard J. Foster, ed., *The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).

seem to apply: “So, you believe in one God—you affirm certain doctrinally orthodox statements? Well, congratulations, you have reached the spiritual maturity level of a demon!”<sup>3</sup>

Numerous books have been written on spiritual disciplines in recent years.<sup>4</sup> I will be using the term “spiritual disciplines” as a shorthand expression for the spiritual practices that Scripture expects of God’s people. For example, it is undeniable that there is a scriptural expectation for believers to pray, fast, read Scripture, care for others, evangelize, etc. I will call these practices “spiritual disciplines.” A spiritual discipline that has risen to prominence in recent years—but about which there is much disagreement—is the practice of “silence and solitude.” At the end of this article, I will be offering a definition and tentative conclusions about silence and solitude, but let us begin with these simple, stripped-down definitions: *Silence is complete quiet for spiritual purposes. Solitude is complete aloneness for spiritual purposes.* As much literature discusses these disciplines together, we will continue to speak of them as one practice, though they can, in fact, be separated into two distinct disciplines.

The question that I will address in the remainder of this article is this: Is the practice of “silence and solitude” (or “solitude and silence”) built on a firm scriptural expectation that believers will engage in this discipline as a means of experiencing God’s grace?

That prominent Christian believers of various backgrounds have found the practice of “silence and solitude” a transforming spiritual experience is undeniable. Contrary to some aspersions, solitude and silence are not just the activities of misguided legalistic ascetics. (Though, they very well *were* and *are* practiced by such persons). Even the famous Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon enjoins the activity. In his *Lectures to His Students* he writes,

Time spent in quiet prostration of soul before the Lord is most invigorating. . . . Quietude, which some men cannot abide, because it reveals their inner poverty, is as a palace of cedar to the wise, for along its hallowed courts the King in his beauty designs to walk. . . . Priceless as the gift of utterance may be, the practice of silence in some aspects far excels it. Do you think me a Quaker? Well, be it so. Herein I follow George Fox most lovingly; for I am persuaded that most of us think too much of speech, which after all is but the shell of thought. Quiet con-

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<sup>3</sup> I recall reading a similar paraphrase in a modern commentary on James, but I have been unable to locate the text.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005); Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991); Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

templation, still worship, unuttered rapture, these are mine when my best jewels are before me. Brethren, rob not your heart of the deep sea joys; miss not the far-down life, by for ever [sic] babbling among the broken shells and foaming surges of the shore.<sup>5</sup>

As a teacher of New Testament and Hermeneutics, the question ever before me is not whether famous, orthodox Christians such as Charles Spurgeon, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, and Francis Schaeffer practiced "silence and solitude" (they did).<sup>6</sup> Nor, is the question of effectiveness primary for me. The question is a scriptural one—do the Old and New Testament display a clear expectation that persons in relationship with God should regularly practice the spiritual disciplines of "silence and solitude"? Is the practice of "silence and solitude" rightly labeled as a *biblical* spiritual discipline?

Much has been written on silence and solitude in the last twenty years—essays, articles, and some popular monographs. Many of these works provide significant insights, and I will quote from a number of them. Nevertheless, in looking at the literature on this subject, it seems to me that there is a need in our day for a well-written "biblical theology" of silence and solitude, just as we have recently seen some very fine monographs on the biblical theology of prayer or possessions.<sup>7</sup> What I intend to present

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<sup>5</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards writes, "True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places, for holy meditation and prayer" (Jonathan Edwards, *On Religious Affections* in *Works* [vol. 2; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, (1834) 1974], 312). Francis Schaeffer writes, "I walked in the mountains when it was clear and when it was rainy I walked backward and forward in the hayloft of the old chalet in which we lived. I walked, prayed, and thought through what the Scriptures taught as well as reviewing my own reasons for being a Christian" (Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1971], ix). John Owen writes, "A second season calling for the exercise of our minds in thoughts of the omnipresence and omniscience of God is made up of our solitudes and retirements. These give us the most genuine trials whether we are spiritually minded or no. What we are in them, that we are, and no more" (*The Works of John Owens* [vol. 7; ed. William H. Goold; Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–53; reprint, Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 375). Robert Lewis Dabney writes, "Time must be allowed in sacred seasons for divine truth to steep the heart with its influence. Our hurry and externality has impoverished our graces. Solitude is essential to the health of the soul. Is not our modern life far too hurried?" (*Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol 1 [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982], 653).

<sup>7</sup> See D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Nottingham: InterVarsity, 1992); Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999). Peter Adams has written a helpful book on biblical spirituality, but he does not focus specifically on our topic (Peter Adams, *Hearing God's Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality*, New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2004).

here is not a full-orbed biblical theology of silence and solitude, but an initial exploratory article. I will be raising five observations and accompanying suggestions that can hopefully be explored in more detail in another setting.

## I. CONCERN FOR CONTEXT

Many works on silence and solitude cite numerous verses that mention aloneness or quietude, but these studies pay little attention to the broader context or authorial intent of the passages cited. In one work on spiritual formation, for example, in a list of devotional verses on silence, the authors included Genesis 24:21 (“Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful”)<sup>8</sup> and 1 Samuel 1:13 (“Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard”).<sup>9</sup> In listing numerous verses with little attention to context, scholars are in danger of substituting their predilections for the biblical authors’ authority and modeling a poor hermeneutic for readers. If biblical scholars handle the text loosely, what can they expect from those who read their works? In fact, as we pay close attention to the biblical text, it opens up a beautiful vista of theological reflection on silence and solitude. Rather than flattening all texts that mention silence or aloneness into the basis for a devotional practice, we should note there are many different reasons for silence and solitude in the Scriptures. A brief list would include silence and/or solitude as an expression of or in close association with:

- (a) deference to God, especially in his role as judge and sovereign Lord (Job 6:24; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Rom 3:19)
- (b) avoidance of sins of speech (Prov 11:12; James 1:19)
- (c) a time to focus on prayer (Matt 6:6; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18)
- (d) physical refreshment (Mark 6:31)
- (e) grief (1 Sam 1:13)
- (f) ignorance (Matt 22:12)
- (g) trust (Ps 131:2; Isa 30:15; Lam 3:26)
- (h) punishment (Luke 1:20)
- (i) humility and creatureliness (Eccl 5:2)
- (j) recognition of life’s varied experiences (Eccl 3:7)
- (k) demonized despair (Luke 8:29)

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<sup>8</sup> English Bible quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>9</sup> Foster, ed., *The Renovare Spiritual Formation Study Bible*, 2312.

In this setting, there is not time to explore this list in detail, but I offer it as evidence that a full-orbed biblical theology of silence and solitude will do much more than provide a basis for a certain mode of devotional retreat.

## II. THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Recent authors advocating silence and solitude frequently appeal to key characters in biblical narrative who spend time alone in silence. Ruth Haley Barton, for example, builds her recent book *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* around the well-known story of Elijah's flight from Jezebel into the wilderness (1 Kgs 19).<sup>10</sup> There are, of course, major interpretive dangers in claiming that the behavior of certain characters in biblical narrative is normative. Where is the hermeneutical justification for seeing this behavior as normative? Sometimes there is hermeneutical justification for seeing a character's actions as normative for the readers, but what are the interpretive guidelines? How do we know that we are not simply picking and choosing the practices we desire as we read through an ancient text? Isaiah was an honored prophet—one of the most quoted in the New Testament. Surely his life was paradigmatic in some way. But, none of us feel the need to wander around naked for three years as a symbolic prophetic oracle (Isa 20:3). Neither, like Ezekiel, will we cook our food over dried animal dung (Ezek 4:15).

Certainly narrative characters can be used as positive or negative paradigms in Scripture, i.e., as examples of how to act *or* how not to act. We should, however, seek clear justification for such claims through clues in the narrative such as editorial comments, repetition, the employment of authoritative speakers, thematic statements and other recognized literary indications.<sup>11</sup> In claiming that certain elements in a historical narrative are normative, we must not only make such assertions, but also justify them with hard evidence.

An example of clear paradigmatic behavior by a character in biblical narrative is the prayer activity of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Commentators on Luke widely recognize not only the explicit imperatives of Jesus regarding prayer in Luke (e.g., 6:28; 11:2; 18:1–8; 19:46; 21:36; 22:40, 46), but the significant inclusion of exemplary prayer episodes from Jesus' life as a hortatory device (Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 11:1; 22:32; 22:41–45).<sup>12</sup> As

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<sup>10</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> See Robert H. Stein's discussion of interpreting narrative in *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing By the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 151–67.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Darrell L. Bock, commenting on themes in Luke, writes, "Prayer is noted by exhortation and example" (*Luke 1:1–9:50* [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 41).

we seek to justify the behavior of certain characters in historical narrative as normative, we need to indicate specific, multiple pieces of evidence. Furthermore, the broader interpretive community can serve as a correction for us if we begin to read our desires or interests into the text. If a quick survey of five major commentaries on a passage does not result in at least one scholar noting the paradigmatic purpose of the behavior in question, then it is unlikely that the debated behavior is normative. The greater the lack of explicit imperatives or expectations regarding silence and solitude in a particular biblical author, the more tentatively we should assert our conclusions regarding these practices. For example, while we have many explicit imperatives regarding prayer in Paul's letters and exemplary prayers from the apostle himself, there is no text in Paul to which one can appeal for an explicit imperative to be alone and quiet for spiritual purposes. It is especially questionable then to assume disciplines of silence and solitude behind Paul's reported travel plans and then project those imagined reasons onto the broader Christian community. Richard Foster in fact does this when he writes,

The apostle Paul withdrew for thirteen years from the time of his conversion until he began his ministry at Antioch. He probably spent three years in the desert and then approximately ten years in his hometown of Tarsus. During that time he no doubt experienced a lot of solitude. This was followed by a period of very intense activity as Paul carried out his mission to the Gentiles. Paul needed both solitude and activity, and so do we.<sup>13</sup>

More likely, given the Nabatean King Aretas's opposition to Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11:32, the apostle was likely proclaiming the gospel in Arabia, not to mention Tarsus, as he is reported doing in Damascus immediately after his conversion in Acts (Acts 9:20).

Similar to Foster, Dallas Willard, in *The Spirit of the Disciples*, claims, "John the Baptist, like many forerunners in the prophetic line, was much alone in the deserted places of his land."<sup>14</sup> The closest textual support we have for Willard's statement is Luke 1:80, which reads, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel." It seems, however, that the main purpose of this statement is to contrast John's prior pre-ministry private life with his later well-known public ministry. Luke does not tell us what John was doing in the wilderness regions, nor even whether he lived alone. Interestingly, when John the Baptist is depicted in the New Testament, he is almost always with his disciples or preaching to the crowds. For example, Mark 1:5 reads, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to

<sup>13</sup> Richard Foster, "Solitude" in *Practical Christianity*, ed. Lavonne Nef (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 305.

<sup>14</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 101.

[John]. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." This hardly sounds like a retreat of silence and solitude. Did John have such a solitary lifestyle? Possibly. But where is the evidence? Other scholars have suggested that John hailed from an Essene commune.<sup>15</sup> An advocate for communal Christian living could cite John in a similarly fallacious argument from silence.

### III. CONCEPTS, NOT MERE WORDS

In some studies on silence and solitude, authors have a too narrow linguistic focus. In other words, it appears that they have done a concordance search on a limited number of words like "aleness" and "silence," but have failed to include other material that should be included within the *concept* of silence and solitude. This is a linguistic fallacy. To deduce properly and thoroughly the Scripture's teaching on silence and solitude, we must not only deal with a truncated list of words, but ideas.

One example of a theme that might be fruitfully explored under the broader concept of silence and solitude is that of Sabbath rest or Festival holidays in the Old Testament. Leaving behind daily responsibilities for times of refreshment and worship is at the heart of Old Testament festival and Sabbath regulations (e.g., Lev 23). This seems to me a fruitful line of inquiry that has not been explored sufficiently.

An illustration from an unrelated New Testament study will illustrate the point. In the Gospel of John, nowhere does it say believers are to obey (*hypakouō*) God. Should we conclude, then, that John did not expect believers to obey God? Of course not! They are to keep (*tēreō*) his word (John 8:51); they are to keep (*tēreō*) his commands (John 14:15). In fact, none of the Johannine writings (the Johannine epistles, Revelation, Gospel of John) contain the word *hypakouō*. If we focus on particular words rather than concepts, we can be led astray.<sup>16</sup>

### IV. THE DANGER OF SELECTIVE USE OF BIBLICAL DATA

In studies of silence and solitude, there is a neglect of apparent contradictory voices in Scripture. Texts are ignored which seem to laud a lifestyle not of silence and solitude, but communication and community. Such texts remind us that there is a complexity to this topic that cannot be resolved by

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<sup>15</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Background of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 492.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher W. Cowan attacks this linguistic fallacy in "The Father and Son in the Fourth Gospel: Johannine Subordination Revisited," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006): 127–28.

using a few narrative texts as paradigms or by citing a litany of proof texts. For example in 2 Corinthians 11:26–28, Paul reports on his apostolic way of life:

I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. *I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.*<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, Paul needs to take a spiritual retreat of silence and solitude. He is wearing himself too thin! He thinks the spiritual life of the churches depend on him rather than trusting in the sovereign God.

Or, is it possible for a deep, praiseworthy, even paradigmatic spirituality to be modeled by one who labors and toils and goes without sleep, who is constantly worn down under the pressure of his personal feeling of responsibility for others' spiritual health?

Mark 6:31–32 is often cited in literature on solitude and silence.<sup>18</sup> The text reads,

Then, because so many people were coming and going that [Jesus and his disciples] did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

But, what of the following two verses, Mark 6:33–34?

But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

The spiritual retreat, so to speak, was cancelled because of the pressing need of sheep lacking a shepherd. Like all major themes in Scripture, silence and solitude cannot be reduced to a flat two-dimensional concept. To understand properly silence and solitude, one must discuss apparently contradictory passages in Scripture that present communication and community as spiritual priorities. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "[O]ne who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of van-

<sup>17</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Foster, ed., *The Renovare Spiritual Formation Study Bible*, 2314.



ity, self-infatuation and despair."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in critiquing the lifestyle of the Desert Fathers, Martin Shelley queries,

How can you learn to love if no one else is around? How can you learn humility living alone? How can you learn kindness or gentleness or goodness in isolation? How can you learn patience unless someone puts yours to the test? . . . As attractive as solitary sanctification may seem, it is life amid people, busyness, and interruptions that develop many of the qualities God requires.<sup>20</sup>

## V. THE AUTHORITY AND SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

While there are rich and varied materials in the Bible that touch on themes of silence, speech, aloneness, and community, Christian scholars have too readily appealed to non-Christian traditions. Rather than drawing from the deep well of biblical revelation, scholars have run too quickly to others. It is not that one can gain no insights by comparative religious study or knowledge of the human condition through considering non-Christian practices of silence and solitude. Yet, such comparison is only appropriate and worthwhile after having exhausted God's unique and authoritative revelation in his Word. For example, the devotional search for a complete emptiness of mind in times of retreat finds more basis in Transcendental Meditation than in the Scriptures.<sup>21</sup> Even authors who affirm biblical authority can spend a large percentage of literary space quoting the examples of great saints while spending little time with actual biblical texts. If the Bible is not our basis for understanding the concepts of silence and solitude and how they relate to spirituality, we will be in danger of adopting non-Christian religious practices or others' experiences as the basis for our supposed Christian spirituality.

The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer again provide a needed reminder here. He writes,

There is an indifferent, or even negative, attitude toward silence which sees in it a disparagement of God's revelation in the Word. This is the

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<sup>19</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 78.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Shelley, "From the Editors," *Leadership* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 3. Stendhal writes, "One can acquire everything in solitude—except character" (*The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, ed. Frank S. Mead [Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1965], 411).

<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, Thomas Merton seems to display such tendencies throughout his writings. See, for example, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972).

view which misinterprets silence as a ceremonial gesture, a mystical desire to get beyond the Word. This is to miss the essential relationship of silence to the Word. Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God. We are silent before hearing the Word because our thoughts are already directed to the Word, as a child is quiet when he enters his father's room. We are silent after hearing the Word because the Word is still speaking and dwelling within us. We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God. We keep silence solely for the sake of the Word, and therefore not in order to show disregard for the Word but rather to honor and receive it.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In this exploratory article, I have written on the practice of silence and solitude from the perspective of a New Testament professor. Among other things, I have argued for a more thoughtful interpretive method that allows the varied biblical references to silence and solitude to shape our understanding of these concepts. Specifically, in this brief article, we are seeking to know how the practices of silence and solitude relate to biblical spiritual disciplines. It seems to me that silence and solitude should not be thought of as spiritual disciplines in and of themselves. They are conditions that aid in the practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer and biblical meditation. The danger of thinking of silence and solitude as disciplines in themselves could lead to a focus on the absence of noise or absence of other persons to the neglect of the actual biblical purpose for that absence. There is no doubt that silence and solitude aid the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible meditation, but, in my opinion, they should not be thought of as actual disciplines in themselves.

Thus, even though Don Whitney classifies silence and solitude as spiritual disciplines, his definitions for these practices seem to be accurate. He defines solitude as "voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for *spiritual purposes*" (my emphasis). And he defines silence as "the voluntary and temporary abstinence from speaking so that *certain spiritual goals might be sought*" (my emphasis).<sup>23</sup> Note the explicit statement of [biblical] spiritual goals that accompanies both of Whitney's definitions.

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<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 184. Whitney also writes, "One reason why the dual Disciplines of silence and solitude can be so thoroughly transforming is because they can help us with the other Spiritual Disciplines" (ibid., 194). Richard Foster also qualifies his discussion of silence: "Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence" (*Celebration of Discipline*, 86).

One would be harder pressed to prove my next point from Scripture, but it also appears that silence and solitude are environmental conditions that aid the healthy emotional and physiological state of most humans. Just as the human body is replenished through sleep, food, water, and air, it seems that God has designed humans such that most, if not all, function better as persons after having experienced intermittent times of silence and solitude. Thus, many persons from non-Christian religions and even persons speaking from a completely non-spiritual perspective experience a sense of happiness and fulfillment from times of silence and solitude. Scores of quotes from non-Christian writers could be marshaled to demonstrate this phenomenon.<sup>24</sup>

From a biblical perspective, however, these times of human replenishment are best used not for human diversion or entertainment, but for the glory of God through prayer, meditation, worship and other biblically-sanctioned behavior.

There are seasons of sleeplessness and seemingly incessant activity that accompany the lives of those seeking to serve God and love his people (Mark 6:33–34; 2 Cor 11:26–28). It appears, however, that these activity-packed periods are only for seasons. Arguably, time apart in silence and solitude stores up emotional and spiritual strength for times of great trial. In Mark 9:29, Jesus states that some demons can only be driven out only after sufficient preparatory prayer. The disciples could not cast out the demon because “This kind can come out only by prayer.” Some great feats of spiritual victory require many hours of preparation.

There remains a danger of thinking that simply aloneness or quietude can result in spiritual fortitude. This is not so, as is amply illustrated by Hannah More in a letter to John Newton, dated 1787. In this missive from her summer hermitage, she writes,

I have always fancied that if I could secure to myself a quiet retreat as I have now really accomplished that I should be wonderfully good; that I should have leisure to store my mind with such and such maxims of wisdom; that I would be safe from such and such temptations; that, in short, my whole summers would be smooth periods of grace and goodness.

Now the misfortune is, I have actually found a great deal of comfort I expected, but without any of the concomitant virtues. I am certainly happier here than in the agitation of the world, but I do not find that I am one bit better.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Michele McCormick, “We’re Too Busy for Ideas,” *Newsweek*, 29 March 1993, 10; Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden: An Annotated Edition*, ed. Water Harding (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 441.

In some ways, we can think of silence and solitude as analogous to fasting, though fasting is best thought of as a distinct spiritual discipline.<sup>26</sup> There are undeniable health benefits from fasting, just as there are undeniable psychological benefits from times of silence and solitude. Fasting without a conscious focus on God, however, is not biblical fasting. Likewise, times of solitude and silence for the Christian are not for a mental or emotional boost, but acts of worship where one's focus can be placed unwaveringly on the gracious God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

With an eye to application, evangelicals might ask themselves what is accomplished in so-called spiritual retreats filled with frenetic activity and endless socialization. How might spiritual retreats be structured in such a way so that times of aloneness and silence lead to a deeper encounter of God and his Word?

Though we cannot endorse Thomas Merton's syncretistic spirituality, we can agree with him that we, as busy ministers, must not become

Men dedicated to God whose lives are full of restlessness and have no real desire to be alone. They admit that exterior solitude is good, in theory . . . but in practice, their lives are devoured by activities and strangled with attachments . . . Solitude is impossible for them. They fear it. They do everything they can to escape it. What is worse, they try to draw everyone else into activities as senseless and devouring as their own.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Note Jesus' explicit expectation of fasting in Matt 9:15; Mark 2:20; and Luke 5:35 (parallel passages).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, as quoted by Steve Nickels, "Into the Silence," *Leadership* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 47.

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